THE JIG OF FORSLIN

CONRAD AIKEN

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Isaac Pm Scheiber

THE JIG OF FORSLIN

By Conrad Aiken

EARTH TRIUMPHANT
AND OTHER TALES IN VERSE

TURNS AND MOVIES
AND OTHER TALES IN VERSE

THE JIG OF FORSLIN
A SYMPHONY

THE JIG OF FORSLIN

A Symphony

BY
CONRAD AIKEN

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To My Wife

NOTE

Parts of this poem have appeared in *The Poetry Journal,* Boston; *The Century;* and *Others,* New York.

The vampire narrative in Part Four is a free adaptation of the story by Gautier—*La Morte Amoureuse.*

PREFACE

It has often been said that a book which needs an explanatory preface is a book which has not entirely succeeded. In the present instance, however, whether that is true or not, there are other complications: and for that reason I am glad to run the risk of being told that the book is a failure.

These complications arise from the fact that *The Jig of Forslin* is somewhat new both in method and in structure. It does not conveniently fit in any category, and is therefore liable, like all such works, to be condemned for not being something it was never intended to be. The critics who like to say 'this man is a realist,' or 'this man is a romanticist,' or in some such way to tag an author once and for all, will here find it difficult. For my intention has been to employ all methods, attitudes, slants, each in its proper place, as a necessary and vital part of any such study as this. Consequently, it is possible to pick out portions of this poem to exemplify almost any poetic method or tone. This eclect-

icism, or passage from one part to another of the poetic gamut, has not been random or for the sake of a mere tour de force: it has been guided entirely by the central theme. This theme is the process of vicarious wish fulfilment by which civilized man enriches his circumscribed life and obtains emotional balance. It is an exploration of his emotional and mental hinterland, his fairyland of impossible illusions and dreams: ranging, on the one extreme, from the desire for a complete tyranny of body over mind, to the desire, on the other extreme, for a complete tyranny of mind over body; by successive natural steps. . .in either direction.

As far as possible, the attempt has been made to relate these typical dreams, or vicarious adventures, not discretely, but in flux. Certain breaks, as between the five main parts of the poem, have been necessary, however, for both artistic and psychological reasons. To break up a single poem of the length of the present one is almost compulsory: the angle of approach must be changed every so often if the reader's attention is to be held at all. On the psychological side, it is obvious

enough that the range of vicarious experience, here of necessity only hinted at, or symbolized by certain concrete and selected pictures, is suggested on a completer and more comprehensive plan than will be found in any specific individual: a good many types have been welded, to give the widest possible range. Forslin is not a man, but man. Consequently, opposite types of experience are here often found side by side, and it would be obviously false to force a connection.

As far as the technique of the verse is concerned,—the harmony and counterpoint, if I may use the terms in a general sense,—it has been governed as much, always, by consideration of the whole as of the part.

Cacophonies and irregularities have often been deliberately employed as contrast. Free rhythms, and rhymeless verse, have been used, also, to introduce variety of movement. Mood and movement, in general, have been permitted to fluctuate together, as they would seem to do automatically if not violated by too arbitrary choice of pattern . . . This does not mean, however, that there has been no choice of pattern whatever.

PROGRAM

The Jig of Forslin is roughly in symphonic form. A program of the more narrative movements may be given as follows:

PART I.

Prologue of Forslin
The Juggler
Escaping Gas
Meretrix: Ironic

PART II.

Patrician Murder
Death in a Peg-House
The Dive of Death

PART III.

Mermaids and Lamias
La Belle Morte

PART IV.

The Miracles
Salome
The Monk is Judas

PART V.

The Playhouse
A Dream of Heroic Love
A Blue-Eyed Girl in Virgo
The Concert: Harmonics
Meretrix: Sentimental
City Night
Epilogue of Forslin

THE JIG OF FORSLIN

THE JIG OF FORSLIN

PART I.

I.

In the clear evening, as the lamps were lighted,
Forslin, sitting alone in his strange world,
Meditated; yet through his musings heard
The dying footfalls of the tired day
Monotonously ebb and ebb away
Into the smouldering west;
And heard the dark world slowly come to rest.
Now, as the real world dwindled and grew dim,
His dreams came back to him . . .
Now, as one who stands
In the aquarium's gloom, by ghostly sands,
Watching the glide of fish beneath pale bubbles,—
The bubbles quietly streaming
Cool and white and green . . . poured in silver . . .
He did not know if this were wake or dreaming;
But thought to lean, reach out his hands, and swim.

The Jig of Forslin

Some things there were, that, being remembered clearly,
Pierced with a troubling gleam
His lucid dream:
As,—that he had stepped in from a blare of sunlight
Over the watery threshold to this gloom;
Sharp red roofs; blue sky; rich autumn trees
Shaking their gold out on the breeze;
And then, after eternities had vanished,
That he was oldish, and that his name was Forslin,
And that he sat in a small bare gaslit room . . .

In the mute evening, as the music sounded,
Each voice of it, weaving gold or silver,
Seemed to open a separate door for him . . .
Suave horns eluded him down corridors;
Persuasive violins
Sang of nocturnal sins;
And ever and again came the hoarse clash
Of cymbals; as a voice that swore of murder.
Which way to choose, in all this labyrinth?
Did all lead in to the self same chamber?

The Jig of Forslin

No matter: he would go . . .
In the evening, as the music sounded;
Streaming swift and thin, or huddled slow . . .

Coffee-cups and artificial palm-trees;
Cigarette-tips glowing in the shadows;
And the mellow gleams in polished marble floors.
The ceaseless footsteps clashed on the cold marble,
The sinister footman turned the revolving doors.
And there was he, sitting alone in silence,
Hearing his heart tick out the hours;
The futile watcher, chronicle of dead days;
While the dancers whirled and danced,
And the murderers chose their knives,
And the lovers leaned, to kiss, through laurel flowers.

The palm-trees trembled faintly on the music—
Stirred by an undertone.
Or rose this music only in his brain?
The eyes of women, the fans, the jewelled fingers,

The soon-checked smiles, the swift words lost in
laughter,
Coffee and cigarettes . . . He sat alone.
The sea of twilight swept his heart again.

And now as one who stands
In the aquarium's green, by cloudy sands,
Watching the glide of fish beneath soft bubbles,—
The bubbles briefly streaming,
Cold and white . . . poured in silver . . .
He did not know if this were wake or dreaming:
But thought to lean, reach out his hands, and swim.

II.

Let us drown, then, if to drown is but to change:
Drown in the days of those whose days are strange;
Close our eyes, and drown;
Wearily, without effort, at our leisure,
In some strange sea-pool, lit with sun and treasure,

The Jig of Forslin

Sink slowly down
From the bright waves above our phantom hands
To vales of twilight sands . . .

Grown weary of ourselves, these tedious hours,
Our voices, our eternal pulses drumming,
Our doubts, our hesitations, our regrets,
And the shrinking self that sits within and cowers . . .
Let us descend in some strange sea-pool;
Creep through the caves to hear the great tide coming;
Forget our souls that murmur of unpaid debts.

I heard a story, once, of one who murdered,
For what, I cannot remember; but he murdered.
With a knife's greedy edge, or with white hands—
What does it matter? The swift deed was done . . .
That was a sombre sea-pool to explore—
Strange things are on that floor.

And once, the music I was listening to

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Suddenly opened, like a luminous book,
To one bright page that told of a strange thing:
A man stepped out in the purple of an arc-light,
A man I knew—I knew him well—
And because the harlot he loved had jilted him,
He held his breath, and died.

Was I that man? How should I know?
Yet, when I die, that man will die with me.
Deep music now, with lap and flow,
Green music streaked with gleams and bubbles of light,
Bears me softly away. Come down with me! . . .
We will live strange lives before this night.

III.

The corners of the ceiling are blown like mist,
Are gathered in lazy swirls and blown away.
My eyes are fixed upon a single picture:
This, only, seems to stay.

The Jig of Forslin

An old man lurching slowly out of darkness,
A bag upon his shoulders growing monstrous . . .
Now he is gone, before I see his face.
I am spread upon a fog, and know no place.

The yellow footlights blazing before my feet;
The same familiar curving wall of fire.
Soft music trembles sweet . . .
Below me and above me turn the faces,
Rows on rows of luminous living faces,
And the furtive watchful eyes;
I stand before them, somehow grown eternal;
They smile upon me from their eternal places;
And now, at the chosen moment, the music dies.

You see me: I am plain: and growing baldish.
The clothes I wear are old, but carefully kept.
You do not know—indeed, how should you know?—
That for years I have hardly eaten, hardly slept,—
To learn this thing. That does not matter, to you.
You yawn, and wait to see what I can do.

The Jig of Forslin

When I was young, juggling was all I did:
I was the best of them;
But growing older, I wanted something better.
To do the impossible! That was the question.
And so I left the stage, and after months,
I thought of this—lying in bed one night—
It seemed ridiculous, too, it was so simple.
To balance one ball on another ball—
Tossing the upper one, to catch it, falling,
In easy balance again—that was the thing!
I started in next day.

Well, sir, you wouldn't believe how hard it was.
Mind you, I wasn't a greenhorn, but an expert—
Made balls, or cards, or hoops, or wooden bottles,
Do anything but talk. But this, by heaven,
This was a man's job! And it took me years.

Practice, practice, practice! That's all it was.
Three times a year I took the stage again

The Jig of Forslin

To earn the money to keep alive with:
Used the old tricks, of course, though getting rusty.
Then I'd get off once more, and find a room
With a high ceiling, for plenty of space,
And go to work again. It was three years
Before I got that balancing down cold—
The balancing, not the tossing: just to balance
The one ball on the other, and keep it there . . .
Then came the tossing. That was harder.
Sometimes, by God, I thought I was going crazy!
My brain was full of crashing marble balls.
I'd reach out every direction and try to catch them—
I could'nt, of course,—they'd all crash to the floor,
And keep on banging till my heart fell dead.
It seemed as if my mind was a dark room,
With a ceiling much too low; and every time
I flung a ball up, a million hit that ceiling.
They hit the gas-jet. They broke the foolish lamp-
shades.
I was always getting ousted for breaking things,
Denting the ceiling, cracking the plaster and walls.

The Jig of Forslin

The lady who lived above me complained of the noise:
So did the man who lived below me.
For five years more I seemed to be always moving—
Always cramming my collars into a bag,
And searching the columns of furnished rooms.

In ten years, though, I had the thing down perfect.
Ten years! I was over forty, and growing grey.
I hadn't married because I hadn't dared to—
No money for it. It was taking chances.
Though as for that, I suppose I might have married,
A girl I met down south, doing a sketch—
I liked her—she was willing, more than willing;
But I had this thing so on my mind, you see,
I couldn't be bothered, somehow, and let it go.

I took my trick to the agents—and they went crazy.
They said they'd never seen a trick to touch it:
O, nothing to it! It was easy getting it on.
One man only—by George, I laughed at him!—
Said the thing looked too easy, and wouldn't take.

But they gave me a little advance for a suit of clothes—
I needed it—and, finally, set the night.

All this, you see, is what is standing before you—
Only, that you don't know it, and I can't tell you.
You see me: I am plain: and growing baldish.
For me, you are rows of faces, lazy eyes.
What does it matter, to you, *who* entertains you? . . .

Now, at the chosen moment, the music dies . . .

I balance the one ball on the other—
It seems so simple—and toss it up, and catch it
In easy balance . . . (My God!)

I'll do it again—for Christ's sake watch me this time!
I balance the one ball on the other . . .
Dip it, and toss it up, and softly catch it

In easy balance again . . . I toss it and catch it . . .
I walk around and keep it balancing there . . .
I toss it and catch it . . . And all the hands are silent!

What is it I am trying to balance—brains?
Or a foolish human life?
There's the curtain falling—and I am over.
I will breathe gas tonight in a locked room,
And forget those faces . . .
Get out of my way! I'm going home.

IV.

That window, in which you saw the light winked out
Behind the yellow shades—was that his room?
Tomorrow, we'll search the papers . . . Tonight blows
cold . . .
Where shall we turn, among bright cobblestones?
This white carnation I wear is growing old . . .

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I have spent years at something; and I am tired.
Let us lounge in a bright café, and listen to music—
Music, threading the smoke of cigarettes . . .
Vermouth, then coffee . . . How much shall we tip
the waiter?
Here the fatigued mind wanders and forgets.

I walked by the river, once, and heard the waves
Slapping the sunlit stones . . . But was that I?
Or was it I who saw a pigeon falling
Down a sheer tower wall against the sky?
Or was it I who heard one night the rain
Weaving in silver an intricate pattern of pain?

These things are idle—they do not matter.
If I was born at midnight or high noon,—
Then, or now, or tomorrow, and to whom—
Is this so relevant? Or is it chatter?
My friends, believe me—it is more worth while
To lean for the moment into dream, and smile.

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V.

Yes; this is manifest: a suicide;
The gas still hissing. Open the windows wide . . .

He closed the door and locked it; and he heard,
In a sudden backward yearning of his mind,
His own slow steps knock wearily up the stairs.
Should he light the gas, then turn it out again?
Survey once more the bed, the floor, the chairs? . .

He saw himself limp down the windy street,
Bending his face against the relentless cold.
The sharp wind made him cry.
Seen through his tears, bright lamps were rayed and daggered.
Grey ghostly clouds streamed over a starry sky.

He had not dined tonight. nor would he dine—
What, among graveyard friends, was bread or wine?

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He closed the stage-door, stumbled in the street.
They said, you turned deep blue: your tongue lolled
out . . .
The cobblestones went dizzy beneath his feet.

And now, in a backward yearning of his mind,
He heard his own harsh steps rasp up the stairs,
Thrust the remorseless key in, lit the gas,
Regarded, motionless, the floor, the chairs . . .

A small room: small and dull: yet large enough.
Space for the living: and more than space for the dead.
The ceiling cracked—no matter. It was old.
There was the window, with the shade drawn down...
There were his hat and coat, laid on the bed.

And now, with thumb and finger he turned twice
The foolish valve that brought a double darkness—;
And would he wait, in comfort, in a chair?

Or, running the yellow shade up, through the window
Watch cold stars play tragedy out there?

A cab went by, and rumbled into distance;
The hollow ringing hooves echoed and echoed,
In perfect rhythm, always, growing faint.
So went his pulse-beats down remote dark alleys,
With a far rhythmic echo, like complaint.

He listened for them . . . they beat, they beat . . . and
beat;
A little curl of dust, a golden vapor,
Idly floating upward from every one.
Upon what streaming road, what cloudy river,
Did those wild horses run?

Someone, once, tried to juggle with stars,
Tried to balance a sun upon a moon,
But found, at last, the sun was much too big . . .

Or was it that the moon was much too small?
There would be flaming death if it should fall.
It fell. And a billion devils danced a jig.

No: it was someone learning to swallow fire—
Strangling to death.
Someone trying, in a great gust of flame,
To draw one deep cool breath . . .
No use, of course. If fire once got within,
It would consume him all.
But this was peace, this darkness!—like old music,
Music heard in a dream; or hid in a wall;
Like a slow music, moving under a sea,
A waveless music, seethed and frothed with starlight,
Desireless; cold; and dead . . .

His hands were tightly clasped beneath his head.

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VI.

Death, among violins and paper roses,
Leering upon a waltz, in evening dress,
Taking his lady's arm with bow and smile. . .
This is unreal. Let us pull off our gloves:
Open the doors, and take the air a while.

Death would be sweet, if one might poison music—
Feel a rich rhythm, with its freight of languor,
Feeding under the heart with every beat:
Faint with a waltz in the blood,
Laugh and topple and fall,
Feel the cold marble flush beneath soft feet . . .

Frivolous death! He plays at cards, drinks coffee,
Sips a cordial, or asks his partner the time.
He straightens his cuffs, flicks off an ash, is silent,
Lowers his eyes, and muses on a crime.

Well, no matter. We deal in juxtapositions.

We cry and love, we laugh and hate.
I think of a shrewd blade hidden inside my brain;
And crumple a roseleaf while I meditate.

And while in the warm dark seats, we watch the spot-
light
Dazzle upon the singer's hair and eyes,
The pink tongue, and the diamonds on her fingers,—
Out in the hall, an epileptic lies
On the white stone. The usher lifts his head:
The young man laughs at the crowd and falls back
dead.

VII.

Things mused upon are, in the mind, like music,
They flow, they have a rhythm, they close and open,
And sweetly return upon themselves in rhyme.
Against the darkness they are woven,
They are lost for a little, and laugh again,
They fall or climb.

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Here, it rains. The small clear bubbles
Pelt and scatter along the shimmering flagstones,
Leap and sing.
Streaks of silver slant from the eaves,
The sparrow puffs his feathers beneath broad leaves
And preens a darkened wing.

Yet round a windy corner of the mind,
A block away, or at the selfsame place,—
We meet you face to face.
You cough with the dust, we hear you say once more,
There in the shadow of a deserted door,
You are cold, you have no money, and you are hungry.
You open your purse to show us that it is empty.
You are crying; and that is strange, for you are a whore.

. . . Bubbles of soft rain scurrying over a pavement,—
Slanting from dark eaves—
Where did I see a sparrow beneath broad leaves? . . .

Well, take us home with you; and when we have loved
you,
(Stroked your drowsy hair, your subtle flesh,
And held your golden throat in the palms of hands)
When we have loved you, and rise
Once more into mortal evening out of your eyes,
We will both give you money; and you may go
To order peacocks' tongues, or a little snow.

. . . There is a seethe of foam far over our hands
On the pale surface . . .
We glide above our shadows along the sands . . .

If you are really so tired, take my arm.
Is this your door? . . . Give me the key.
Why don't you sell these hangings if you are poor?
You deserve to be.

. . . Something about your skin is like soft rain—

The Jig of Forslin

Cool and clear . . . it reminds me of many things.
Your eyes, they are like blue wells of pain—
I remember a sparrow preening his rainy wings . . .
He sat under broad leaves, puffing his feathers and
winking . . .
What are you thinking?

Now that you're here—there's no use in your going . . .
Wait till the morning. When we have loved we'll sleep.
Sleep is better than wine; and hunger will keep.

. . . Rain, rain, rain. All night the rain.
The roofs are wet, the eaves drip.
The pelted leaves bend down and rise again.
The bubbles chirp and skip.

This is spring. The snowdrops start to grow,
The rain will wash them clean.
This is spring, the warm drops wound the snow,
The black earth aches with green . . .

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And now that it is morning, we will go.
What do we care for you—you, only a whore?
Starve if you like! You'll have to end it sometime.
There will be plenty more.
Sell your hangings, pawn your dress, your ear-rings.
What do we care? You knew we wouldn't pay.
That's right, cry! It'll make you feel much better,—
Meanwhile, we go our way . . .

The lamps are turned out on the music racks,
The concert ends, the people rise,
The applause behind us roars like rain on a roof,
The great doors close. We shrink beneath blue skies.
Was this a music? Or did I hear a story?
Yet I remember well that hair, those eyes . . .

And much besides, that, nimble even as music,
Sings, flashes, is gone . . .
For a million years the gods have been telling me
secrets.
I do not remember one.

PART II.

I.

Let us succumb to a soft blue wave of music:
Endure its pressure, let it explore our souls,
Inquisitive, cold, and strange.
We will pay no heed to a plaintive bell that tolls
Far over our heads, in sunlight . . . forever restless . . .
But yield our depths to the silent flow of change.

Here all is dark, all leans upon the stream.
Here we may flow from opiate sound to sound,
Embodied in music. Here we may live our dream.
Here is no striving, no choosing. We do not know
Whither we drift, but shut our eyes and go.

I have surrendered my heart to chords of sound,
Sweet successions of falling sound;
A star is snared in sinister boughs of twilight

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Against a pale green sky.
I have surrendered my soul to a pleading music;
I drink a poison of melody and I die.

Here are hands I reached from the dust to touch,
Eyes I loved in the darkness and left behind.
Here, unforgotten mouths I never kissed.
I tried with hands to brush aside a mist . . .
Come, let us flow with the music, and seek, and find.

Once I loved; and once I died; and once
I murdered my lover, my lover who had betrayed me.
Once I stepped from the threshold, and saw my body
Huddled in purple snow.
Once I escaped my flesh and rose on starlight.
The theme returns . . . We bow our hearts and go.

One night, I swam with pilgrims by the moon,
Swam by moonlight in a wide blue river;

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A field of flax in flower.
I drowned among the stalks, the tossing stars.
I breathed green foam. I was covered with seethe of
leaves . . .

But who was he I left behind me, waiting
There on the platform, reading an evening paper?
He looked up once, to see if it would rain . . .
Great leaves are turned between us. Moons are
scattered.
The theme recurs . . . And we drift on again.

II.

If we should rise from whirl to silver whirl,
Through yellowing light to a faintly chiming surface,
And shatter the film . . . what discords should we
hear? . . .
Monstrous shadows blot and disintegrate;
The stars above our earth are cold and clear;

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And we walk, as we have walked a thousand times,
Past trees and curbs and gutters,
Mark how the arc-lamp dims and starts and sputters,
Muse bewitching scandals, ponder crimes,
Laugh with a friend, concealing what we think,
Or sit, to chat and drink.

Someone has been to have his fortune told—
With Tarot cards. The pentacles and wands
Tell him he hates the women, and is cold.
He laughs, we laugh,—we wonder if he lies,
Watching a wizened question in his eyes.

And if he lies, and if last night he slept
With some flushed harlot, or his latest lover,
We muse upon him, and marvel what it is
That yields his banal soul these ecstasies:

Is it his voice that sets a woman trembling,

The Jig of Forslin

The hesitant speech, the sidelong trick of eyes,
The heavy brow, the dead white skin?
Or is he all the while dissembling,—
Like us, though starved, incapable of sin?

We chronicle his speech, and afterwards
Confer upon him . . . We ravel out his brain.
We have remembered certain curious words
He uttered once when drinking: these explain . . .
Priests of dissection are we: we dissect him.
It is ourselves have pain, but pleasant pain.

And so, good-night. The white clouds gulf the stars,
Dust blows down the street,
Through divers moonlit canyons glide our feet.

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III.

Before us ghostly paths flow into the darkness,
Slant upon windy darkness, weave and gleam.
Or are they climbs of music, half-remembered?
Or do we gaze at some unsteady dream?

This is the night for murder: Get us knives:
We have long sought for this.
What queen, tonight, is murdered with a kiss?
What kings tonight shall forfeit their rash lives?
Rosamund, with a red skull in her hands;
Helen in starlight, watching beacons flare;
Or Cleopatra, combing her blue-black hair . . .

She lies before me, smiling. She has betrayed me . . .
Her flesh was sweeter to me than orange-blossoms,
Her hair more marvellous to me than night.
Her voice was a breaking of golden ripples,
I stood in her eyes as in a sea of light.
I loved her for all these things . . . But she has betrayed me.

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Tell them to play loud music in the hall—
Blow horns, beat drums, and strike on brass . . .
No one shall hear us now. We are hidden in tumult.

I would remind you of our wedding-night,
Of the sweet music we listened to through love . . .
But you demur, just as I hoped: you say
'Why talk of that?'—pretending modesty;
And sigh, and drop your eyes . . . Yes, you remember
My mouth upon your eyelids, and it disgusts you.
For now you have found a mouth you desire much more.

This purple silk that suits your throat so well—
(How I have loved that throat! It dazzles me.)
And these jade scarabs trembling from your ears:
Do you remember when I gave them to you?
And how you clung to me?
And do you remember dropping from your hair
White hyacinth flowers? . . .

No, you are musing—you stare, but do not see:
Your eyes are fixed upon the foolish fountain;
You seem to listen: hearing whose voice, I wonder?

I would remind you of the day we walked
Beside the river, twisting each other's hands—
Queer, what a pang can be in the flesh of hands!—
And saw white pigeons flying across the water,
And golden flakes of light dancing in azure,
And broad pale streams of sun poured down the west.
We were both young. The world lay luminous:
Every petal and cobweb trembled music . . .
Do you remember—or is this commonplace?
And do I—perhaps—touch things you would forget?

You guess I am angry—I have betrayed myself.
You open your eyes, startled, a little wider—
Things are unfolding here you did not dream of.
Do you divine the virgin knife, perhaps . . . ?
What was I going to say . . . O yes, the time

The Jig of Forslin

I saw you first . . . so many years ago . . .
My God, how innocent your eyes looked, too!—
All in white, by the palace door, you stood,
Talking with some young thing,
Until you saw me come, and turned your head
In an absent way to dart my eyes with yours . . .
There was your whole soul in that little trick—
I could not see it, then . . . I see it now.

Why has the music stopped? I gave no order.
Let it continue. Not the strings,
But horns and drums. And gnashing of brass . . .

They say young what's-his-name—you know, the captain—
Has come to town again. O, don't you know him?
I thought you did. But then, it's no great matter.
His quarters are not so spacious as they were,
And somewhat dark . . . And yet he was reputed
A man of fabulous wealth! And many ladies,
(Or so they say,)

Wear costly favors from him—rings and bracelets—
Why do you hide your hand?—and such like trifles.

You are pale. I have mentioned something that concerns you.
Was it this captain? . . . I hope you notice
I use the past tense, now, in speaking of him.
Yes, it's a pity—he was full of promise—
Quick of eye, though somewhat tardy of arm . . .
And think of all the ladies with broken hearts!

Sit still, my dear. It's no use running now.
You guess my purpose: and, surely, you give me credit
For planning all details with scrupulous care!
The doors are locked—the curtains drawn across them—
No one would hear you if you beat upon them.
And even if you could scream, in so great terror,
Could you scream louder than horns and cymbals and gongs?

You should have been a player, and played to music.

How well you mimic horror! Your stretched eyes
Almost persuade me that you understand me!
Now, will you take death quietly,—or with struggle?
Take my advice: let it be soft and certain—
Surrender to it, make it a suicide—
A slow thin push at the heart, and then, red darkness.

This is a pity: I loved you. I will not blame you,
Now thats it's all too late.
This little knife, for the moment, is my tongue.
But we were happy, in our season,—
And it is you who shaped this end.

Here's my knife—between my fingers I press it,
And into the panic heart . . .
Do you still hear the music? Do you still see me?
Do wide lights swim and dazzle before your eyes?

Make haste, great queen! The darkness opens for
you . . .

Now they can stop their music. I am tired.
Shall I withdraw the knife,—or leave it there? . . .

IV.

We move in the music, and are one with it.
You close your eyes, your fan against my arm.
Sometimes, I have thought this tongue of yours had
wit.

But are you real, in spite of lips and eyes,
And the webbed hair translucent against the light—
You, who upon this music fall and rise?

What would you say if as we smoothly turn
To the slow waltz that beats these walls, this floor;
Or as we wave past palm-trees through the door;
If I should mildly observe, as commonplace,
'Yes, I murdered my wife this afternoon' . . .
Would you think me out of tune?

The Jig of Forslin

My hands are red with murder, if you could see them—
Or were they certain hands inside my brain?
It is difficult to explain . . .
Two lovers, once, went walking beside a river:
There was a white cloak and a wet red stain . . .

And a blade comes gliding in along the music,
Between the pulses.—What becomes of it?
Does it only cut the page,—or pierce a heart? . . .
The hypocritical music sighs and turns.
It murmurs of palms, of artificial ferns.

And now there are horns and drums, they strike on silver,
Cymbals are smitten, great gongs clang:
It is as if they did it to drown a murder.
They deafen the air with clamor, they hide a scream . . .
Do I dance or murder now? Or do I dream?

No, this was real, this murder—she is there,

Lying among her roses where I left her,
With her eyes closed and a pale rose in her hair . . .
And you, with whom I dance,—or think I dance,—
Thin out and vanish like sound upon still air.

v.

This dust I softly blow across my hand,
Fibreless now, was the soft woven fragrance
She threw about her throat as evening came.
Here are the rings. Here is a comb of amber.
Here, the small silver plate that tells her name.
There is no trace of blood, here in the dust—
No trace of violence. Dust is most discreet.
All that is hinted is sedate and sweet.

A goblin-ring of junipers marks the place—
Half way up the hillside. I remember
How white, beside the juniper, was her face . . .
There is a graveyard look to juniper—
Furtive and sinister.

The Jig of Forslin

It sidles out of the graves to keep an eye
On the black crows that caw beneath this sky.

There is no need that murder should be known.
Murderers are foolish. In their panic,
They leave a scarf, a handkerchief, a knife,
The newly purchased pistol, on the floor—
And leaving this, of course, they leave much more.

Once, I killed a priest, before his altar,
With his own crucifix—
Smashed through a stained glass window, in the moonlight,
To steal the silver chalice, the candlesticks . . .
They tracked my footsteps through the snow,
I heard them coming, and hid in a door—
And I struck one down with the heavy candlestick,
But what was one to four? . . .
The rest is vague. I saw it long ago.

And once I murdered, by the waterfront:
A drunken sailor, in a peg-house brawl.
We were all drinking, and laughing, and having a love-feast,
And somehow got to quarreling after a while.
Maybe it was jealousy—I don't know.
But all of a sudden this boy went red with rum,
I saw his little eyes shut up and burn,
'By God,' he says, 'I'll fix you!'—He pulls a knife
And runs for me, with his slavering mouth wide open.

All the rest were lying around the floor
Half soused, and naked, and all too scared to help.
In the smoky light I jumped across pale bodies,
Stepped on somebody's hand and heard him yell,
Tripped over somebody's leg, went sprawling headlong,
But somehow managed to get behind a table
Just before he reached me. I grabbed the lamp,
One of those heavy glass ones, and let him have it
Smash in the forehead. And he dropped without a whimper.

It crushed his brain in, oh it was something awful! . . .
No one, not even his mother, would have known him.
So we just slipped him quietly off the wharf
Into the river, and that was the end of it.

And then, before I came to peg-house pimping,—
Or was it after? Time is confusing me,
Time is a circle, a snake that devours itself . . .
For a moment I peer up closely into starlight,
For a moment I walk once more a lamplit street,
See all things clearly out of time and space.
I smoke, and narrow my eyes to meditate,
Hear music swell and die, see coffins pass,
Watch the blown daisies bend upon the grass,
Glide through revolving doors to walk on marble,
To listen amused to the swift uneven footfalls,
Or the complaints of violins hidden in walls;
To climb at last to a little dingy room,
Three flights up or more,
And listen, through the loneliness and gloom,
To the drowsy footfalls of the tired day

The Jig of Forslin

Monotonously ebb and ebb away
Into the smouldering west;
And hear the dark world slowly come to rest . . .

And then, before I came to peg-house pimping,
Or maybe afterwards—what does it matter?
This happened; well, it must have been before . . .
I smell the circus smell—the stale rank sawdust,
Hear elephants snorting dust and straws;
I see once more the chariots rumbling round,
The red-mouthed clown, the enormous crowd applauding,
Trumpets blowing, greyhounds leaping through hoops;
And I see my wife, in spangles, with a whip in her hand,
Chivvying sullen leopards to their cages.

She left me, because she liked the red-mouthed clown.
Both of them quit the circus; and for years

The Jig of Forslin

I hunted for them, swearing I'd kill them both.
I went on day by day, doing my stunt,—
The dive of death,—as if it hadn't happened:
Twice a day I took the Dive of Death,
Falling a hundred feet to a little net.
And all the while I nursed my grievance, and waited.

At last I found them: they were still living together,
Drinking and starving there, with a boy and a girl.
On a bright Sunday noon I went and found them.
I knocked on the door. 'Come in!' She said . . .
And there she was, feeding bread to a parrot,
Thin, but looking the same; and there was he
Rocking his head on a scarlet table-cloth,
Silly with beer. 'Well, here I am, Marie!'—
She screamed, and half got up. The boy and girl
Came running in, they grabbed me round the legs.
'Harry!' she gasped, the tears rolled down her cheeks,
Her face grew redder and redder, she began to gurgle;
But I locked my hands around her dirty throat,
And though they bit me, I choked her till she was dead.

Her man looked up, and waved a hand toward me,
And fell asleep again. I took the children
And flung them down from the balcony to the court-
yard:
I suppose I shouldn't have done it. Then I climbed
Up on the railing, and folded my arms, all ready
For one last Dive of Death. And there they got me . . .
Those damned fool neighbors heard the children
screaming,
And spoiled the climax. And so they marched me off
Through Sunday streets, with people coming from
church,
And bells tolling, and the May sun shining;
For the last time I walked under elm-trees and oak-
trees,
And saw the grass, and the shadows of pebbles, and
people.
But I had paid her out, as I said I would . . .
So what did I care? My hands were satisfied . . .

The Jig of Forslin

VI.

Wind blows: the dying music recedes from me;
The shadows of trees revolve and melt in the wind;
And papers skip and pirouette over the grass.
The lamps are lighted, the sea-gulls drift to sea,
Night falls with a shrill of horns; or is it daybreak?
Realities fade; dreams come; and dreams pass.

No matter how swift I run, the stars run with me . . .
Let us lounge in a bright café and listen to music,
Music, treading the smoke of cigarettes.
For years I have borne in my heart a burden of hatred . . .
Vermouth, then coffee . . . how much should we tip the waiter?
Here the fatigued mind wanders and forgets.

PART III.

I.

Now that the sun flows over the edge of the hills,
Over blue peaks of dream,
And brightly again down into the frosted meadows,
We hear young maidens singing, and silently watch them
Dance in the sharp light, wheeling their long blue shadows . . .

This is as if in the drowse of noon,
White petals trembled down from the boughs of heaven.
We stretch our hands, we close our eyes, we lift our faces;
The fall of the sun is a poured music.

This is as if, in the going of twilight,

The Jig of Forslin

When skies are pale and stars are cold,
Dew should rise from the grass in little bubbles,
And tinkle in music among green leaves.

Something immortal lives in such an air—
We breathe, we change.
Our bodies become as cold and bright as starlight,
Our hearts grow young and strange.

Let us extend ourselves as evening shadows
And learn the nocturnal secrets of these meadows.

II.

Some have wedded sea-girls and lived in the sea,
Hearing the whisper of surf far over their hands,
And tuned their loving
To green and purple twilight, lazily moving
On the cold sway of tides;

Watching the little fish blow bubbles and sands;
And the ships passing, like dark clouds, silently.

And I was one of these, but wearied of it,
Of the faint laughter, and the ghostly speech,
And so in the moonlight I climbed the pebbled hill,
And stood up, startled, on a sunlit beach . . .
I remember her glaucous eyes, her long cool fingers,
And the pale mouth, and the sad white face—
And her voice, thinly singing, an elfin music
Heard in an elfin place . . .
But that was long ago. I do not remember
What was her name, or why it was that I loved her.

Some are moonstruck, and love a demon woman;
And wander the world forever after
Hearing an echo of marvelous laughter:
These are pale, as who have seen holy things,
They stumble on stones,

The Jig of Forslin

Their eyes are forever startled by knowledge of
wings . . .
My blood was tranced at night by the palest woman,
But when I kissed her the blood in my veins went cold,
Her mouth was as cold as the sea.
Among the leaves she rose like fire;
Her eyes were phosphor: her cold hands burned.
But when the red sun clanged she fell from me,
She fell from my lips with an anguished cry,
And a jewelled snake I saw her lie
Wreathing her sluggish ashes in green grass beaded
with dew,
Her little eyes red in the sun.
My heart lay dead when I saw the thing I had done,
And I struck at the wind, I ran in the dark,
I kissed the huge hands of time, I laughed at rain;
For I who had loved a lamia, well I knew
I should never again love a mortal, or see her again . . .

Grey ghosts move in the lamplight: these are dreams.
Turn back the page, strike a profounder chord,

We will resolve these phantoms in clear fire.
Our spirits have ridden abroad.
Far off, we hear the gallop of demon desire.

III.

As one who dreams, in a light sleep, may hear
Sounds through his dream,—bells, or passing steps
On the floor above him, or in the street below,—
Rhythmic, precise and clear:
Or voices muttering in an adjacent room,
Lifting a moment, to die again;—
Yet all the while he will pursue his dream,
Guessing a sinister purport in well-known sounds,
And still in his own deep silent world remain:
So now I guess the world from which I came,
In flares of light, ghosts of remembered sound,
Which haunt me here . . . A voice, a street, a bell . . .
Whence do I come, and why? And what's my name?

And you, who cut an orange upon a plate,

The Jig of Forslin

With a small silver knife, and lean, and smile,—
You whose mouth is a sly carnivorous flower,
Whose flesh is softer and cooler than rainy wind,—
I gaze upon you, and muse strange aberrations,
I hear unearthly music, ghostly flutes;
I dance in a black eclipse, and through my veins
Is a cold froth of sea; and you are forgotten . . .

And you, who when your act is over peer
Witchlike between the curtains, above the footlights,
Holding the curtains with jewelled hands, to smile
A slow and mordant smile from cavernous eyes—
What hideous things amuse you secretly?
What have you drunk to make your lips so red?
And when the moon creeps up, and stars dance coldly,
And crickets cry in the dew, and dead leaves fall,
Do you spread bat-wings from a starlit wall? . . .

Music dissolves and dies,—and sings again,
Changing its mood; the lights wink out in darkness,

A shrill wind crosses us, we are blown and stagger.
Our footsteps ring intense. The lights return.
And we have silently changed . . . To what, to whom?

IV.

Midnight it was, or just before;
And as I dipt for the hundredth time
The small white quill to add a rhyme
To the cold page, in candlelight,
Whereon my treatise slowly grew,—
Someone harshly knocked at the door;
And marvelling I became aware
That with that knock the entire night
Went mad; a sudden tempest blew;
And shrieking goblins rode the air.

Alarmed, not knowing why, I rose
And dropt my quill across the page.
What demon now, what archimage,

So roiled the dark? And my blood froze
When through the keyhole, with the wind,
A freezing whisper, strangely thinned,
Called my name out, called it twice . . .
My heart lay still, lay black as ice.
The candle trembled in my hands;
Between my fingers the dim light went;
Shadows hurried and shrank and blent,
Huddled, grotesque, in sarabands,
Amazed my eyes, till dumb I stood,
And seemed to see upon that air
Goblins with serpents in their hair,
Mouths contorted for soundless cries,
And hands like claws, and wounded throats,
And winking embers instead of eyes.
The blood went backward to my heart.
Thrice in the night a horn was blown.
And then it seemed that I had known,
For ages, even before my birth,
When I was out with wind and fire,
And had not bargained yet with earth,

That this same night the horn would blow
To call me forth. And I would go.
And so, as haunted dead might do,
I drew the bolt and dropped the chain,
And stood in dream, and only knew
The door had opened and closed again:
Until between my eyelids came
A woman's face, a sheath of flame,
The wink of opals in dusky hair,
A golden throat, a smile like fire,
And eyes that seemed to burn the air
So luminous were they with desire.
She laid one hand upon my arm
And straight a blaze was in my veins,
It pierced me so I feared a charm,
And shrank; whereat, pale, hurriedly,
She whispered 'Quickly! Come with me!
All shall be clear! But now make haste—
Four hours till dawn, no time to waste!'—
The amazing whiteness of her skin
Had snared my eyes, and now her voice

The Jig of Forslin

Seethed in my ears, and a ghost of sin
Died, and above it I heard rejoice
Loud violins, in chords ascending,
And laughter of virgins; I blew the light,
And followed her, heedless of the ending,
Into the carnival of that night.

Make haste, beloved! the night passes,
The day breaks, the cock crows,
Mist slinks away in the sunlight,
And the thin blood drips from the rose.

Black stallions rushed us through the air,
Their hooves upon the wind struck fire;
Rivers, and hills, and a moonlit spire
Glided beneath us, and then a flare
Of gusty torches beckoned us down
To a palace-gate in a darkened town.
She took my hand and led me in
Through walls of basalt and walls of jade,
And I wondered, to hear a violin
Sweetly within that marble played.

I heard it sing, a wandering tone,
Imprisoned forever in that deep stone.

And then upon a couch we lay,
And heard invisible spirits play
A ghostly music; the candles muttered,
Rose-leaves trembled upon the floor,
Lay still, or rose on the air and fluttered;
And while the moon went dwindling down
Poisoning with black web the skies,
She narrowed her eyelids, and fixed her eyes,
Fiercely upon me; and searched me so
With speeding fire in every shred
That I, consumed with a witching glow,
Knew scarcely if I were alive or dead:
But lay upon her breast, and kissed
The deep red mouth, and drank the breath,
And heard it gasping, how it hissed
To mimic the ecstasy of death.
Above us in a censer burning
Was dust of lotos-flowers, and there

The Jig of Forslin

Ghosts of smoke were ever turning,
And gliding along the sleepy air,
And reaching hands, and showing faces,
Or coiling slowly like blue snakes,
To charm us moveless in our places . . .
But then she softly raised her head
And smiled through brooding eyes, and said
'O lover, I have seen you twice.
You changed my veins to veins of ice.
The first time, it was Easter Eve,—
By the church door you stood alone;
You listened to the priests intone
In pallid voices, mournfully;
The second time you passed by me
In the dusk, but did not see . . .'
Her whisper hissed through every vein
And flowered coldly in my brain . . .
I slept, how long I do not know;
But in my sleep saw huge lights flare,
And felt a rushing of wild air,
And heard great walls rock to and fro . . .
Make haste, beloved! The cock crows,

And the cold blood drips from the rose . . .

. . . And then I woke in my own room,
And saw the first pale creep of sun
Drip through the dewy shutters, and run
Across the floor, and in that gloom
Marvelled to find that I had slept
Still fully dressed, and that I kept
One bruised white rose-leaf in my hand—
From whom?—and could not understand.

For seven days my quill I dipt
To wreathe slow filigrees of script:
For seven nights when midnight came,
I swooned, I swept away on flame,
Rushed on the stallions of the air,
Heard goblins laugh, saw torches flare,
And all night long, while music mourned
Hidden under the trembled floor,
I heard her low strange voice implore
As one who speaks from under the earth,

The Jig of Forslin

Imploring music, imploring mirth,
Before the allotted time was done
And cock crew up the sullen sun.
Day by day my face grew pale,
Hollowed and purple were my eyes,
I blinked beneath too brilliant skies:
And sometimes my weak hand would fail,
Blotting the page whereon I wrought . . .
This woman is a witch! I thought . . .
And I resolved that night to find
If this were real, or in my mind.

Viol and flute and violin
Remote through labyrinths complained.
Her hand was foam upon my skin.
And then I closed my eyes and feigned
A sudden sleep; whereat her eyes
Peered, and darkened, and opened wide,
Her white brow flushed, and by my side
Laughing, with little ecstatic cries,

She kissed my mouth, she stroked my hair,
And fed upon me with fevered stare.
'One little drop!' she murmured then—
'One little bubble from this red vein,
And safe I await the sun again—'
I heard my heart hiss loud and slow;
A gust of wind through the curtains came;
It flapped the upright candle-flame.
Her famishing eyes began to glow,
She bared my arm; with a golden pin,
Leaned, and tenderly pricked the skin.
And as the small red bubble rose,
Her eyes grew bright with an evil light,
She fawned upon me; and my heart froze
Seeing her teeth so sharp and white. . .

Vampire! I cried. The flame puffed out.
Two blazing eyes withdrew from me.
The music tore discordantly.
The darkness swarmed with a goblin rout.
Great horns shattered, and walls were falling,

The Jig of Forslin

Green eyes glowed, voices were calling;
And suddenly then the night grew still,
The air blew suddenly damp and chill,
Stars above me paled in the sky,
Far off I heard one mournful cry—
Or under the earth—and then I found
I lay alone on the leafy ground.
And when stars died, and the cock crowed,
The first pale pour of sunlight showed
That it was on a grave I lay,
A new-made grave of tumbled clay.

That night I took a priest with me;
And sharp at the midnight, secretly,
By lantern-light, with spade and pick,
Striking on stones with loamy click,
We laid a golden coffin bare,
And sprinkled the holy water there.
And straight we heard a sorrowful cry;
Something upon the dark went by;
The trees thrashed in a sudden gust;

Pebbles rattled in windy dust,
Far off, wildly, pealed a bell,
A voice sobbed, and silence fell.
And I grew sad, to think that I
Should make that marvellous spirit die . . .

Make haste, beloved! The night passes,
The day creeps, the cock crows,
Mist slinks away in the pale sun
And the opened grave must close.

v.

Vampires, they say, blow an unearthly beauty,
Their bodies are all suffused with a soft witch-fire,
Their flesh like opal . . . their hair like the float of night.
Why do we muse upon them, what secret's in them?
Is it because, at last, we love the darkness,
Love all things in it, tired of too much light?

The Jig of Forslin

Here on the lamplit pavement, in the city,
Where the high stars are lost in the city's glow,
The eyes of harlots go always to and fro—
They rise from a dark world we know nothing of,
Their faces are white, with a strange love—
And are they vampires, or do I only dream?. . .
Lamps on the long bare asphalt coldly gleam.

And hearing the ragtime from a cabaret,
And catching a glimpse, through turning doors,
Of a spangled dancer swaying with drunken eyes,
Applauded and stared at by pimps and whores—
What decadent dreams before us rise? . . .

The pulse of the music thickens, it grows macabre,
The horns are a stertorous breath,
Someone is dying, someone is raging at death . . .
Around a coffin they dance, they pelt dead roses,
They stand the coffin on end, a loud spring clangs,
And suddenly like a door the coffin uncloses:

And a skeleton leers upon us in evening dress,—
There in the coffin he stands,
With his hat in his white-gloved hands,
And bows, and smiles, and puffs at a cigarette.
Harlots blow kisses to him, and fall, forgotten,
The great clock strikes; soft petals drift to the floor;
One by one the dancers float through the door,
Hair is dust, flesh is rotten,
The coffin goes down into darkness, and we forget. . .

Who told us this? Was it a music we heard,
A picture we saw, a dream we dreamed?. . .
I am pale, I am strangely tired.
A warm dream lay upon me, its red eyes gleamed,
It sucked my breath . . . It sighed . . . It afflicted me . . .
But was that dream desired, or undesired?

We must seek other tunes, another fragrance:
This slows the blood in our hearts, and cloys our veins.
Open the windows. Show us the stars. We drowse.

PART IV.

I.

Twilight is spacious, near things in it seem far,
And distant things seem near.
Now in the green west hangs a yellow star.
And now across old waters you may hear
The profound gloom of bells among still trees,
Like a rolling of huge boulders beneath seas.

Silent as thought in evening contemplation
Weaves the bat under the gathering stars.
Silent as dew we seek new incarnation,
Meditate new avatars.
In a clear dusk like this
Mary climbed up the hill to seek her son,
To lower him down from the cross, and kiss
The mauve wounds, every one.

The Jig of Forslin

Men with wings
In the dusk walked softly after her.
She did not see them, but may have felt
The winnowed air around her stir,
She did not see them, but may have known
Why her son's body was light as a little stone.
She may have guessed that other hands were there
Moving the watchful air.

Now, unless persuaded by searching music
Which suddenly opens the portals of the mind,
We guess no angels,
And are contented to be blind.
Let us blow silver horns in the twilight,
And lift our hearts to the yellow star in the green,
To find perhaps, if, while the dew is rising,
Clear things may not be seen.

The Jig of Forslin

II.

Under a tree I sit, and cross my knees,
And smoke a cigarette.
You nod to me: you think perhaps you know me.
But I escape you, I am none of these;
I leave my name behind me, I forget. . .

I hear a fountain shattering into a pool;
I see the gold fish slanting under the cool;
And suddenly all is frozen into silence.
And among the firs, or over desert grass,
Or out of a cloud of dust, or out of darkness,
Or on the first slow patter of sultry rain,
I heard a voice cry 'Marvels have come to pass,—
The like of which shall not be seen again!'

And behold, across a sea one came to us,
Treading the wave's edge with his naked feet,
Slowly, as one might walk in a ploughed field.
We stood where the soft waves on the shingle beat,

In a blowing mist, and pressed together in terror,
And marvelled that all our eyes might share one error.

For if the fisher's fine-spun net must sink,
Or pebbles flung by a boy, or the thin sand,
How shall we understand
That flesh and blood might tread on the sea-water
And foam not wet the ankles? We must think
That all we know is lost, or only a dream,
That dreams are real, and real things only dream.

And if a man may walk to us like this
On the unstable sea, as on a beach,
With his head bowed in thought—
Then we have been deceived in what men teach;
And all our knowledge has come to nought;
And a little flame should seeek the earth,
And leaves, falling, should seek the sky,
And surely we should enter the womb for birth,
And sing from the ashes when we die.

Or was the man a god, perhaps, or devil?
They say he healed the sick by stroke of hands;
And that he gave the sights of the earth to the blind.
And I have heard that he could touch a fig-tree,
And say to it, 'Be withered!' and it would shrink
Like a cursed thing, and writhe its leaves, and die.
How shall we understand such things, I wonder,
Unless there are things invisible to the eye?

And there was Lazarus, raised from the dead:
To whom he spoke quietly, in the dusk,—
Lazarus, three days dead, and mortified;
And the pale body trembled; as from a swoon,
Sweating, the sleeper woke, and raised his head;
And turned his puzzled eyes from side to side. . .

Should we not, then, hear voices in a stone,
Talking of heaven and hell?
Or if one walked beside a sea, alone,
Hear broodings of a bell?—

Or on a green hill in the evening's fire,
If we should stand and listen to poplar trees,
Should we not hear the lit leaves suddenly choir
A jargon of silver music against the sky?—
Or the dew sing, or dust profoundly cry?—

If this is possible, then all things are:
And I may leave my body crumpled there
Like an old garment on the floor;
To walk abroad on the unbetraying air;
To pass through every door,
And see the hills of the earth, or climb a star.

Wound me with spears, you only stab the wind;
You nail my cloak against a bitter tree;
You do not injure me.
I pass through the crowd, the dark crowd busy with murder,
Through the linked arms I pass;
And slowly descend the hill, through dew-wet grass.

The Jig of Forslin

III.

They tell me John, at Herod's court, is dead:
John with whom I talked beneath a plane-tree:
John, whose holy touch is on my head.

Herod, mark my words, you shall pay for this!
You shall forever yield to the dance of demons;
And see your grizzled head in a bowl of fire.

They say his loud voice crying from the cistern,
Calling the curse of God upon Herodias,
Troubled her night and day.
She heard his restless chain clank in the cistern.
In the night-time she heard him cry 'Adulteress!'—
And Herod heard him, and laughed; and the Roman captains;
And now he is dead, they say.

For in the banquet-room

The Jig of Forslin

The lovely Jewess crept and danced,
While he was drinking wine she came and danced.
Dance, Jewess! For much depends upon you:
And you shall be rewarded with something precious.
Behind the curtains Herodias quivers,
Her cruel eyes are narrowed on you;
And Herod follows you through a cloud of wine.

There is no music in the banquet-room,
But the snores of sodden guests.
Dance, Jewess! Dance, Salome!
Beautiful are your hands, beautiful are your breasts.
You are young and lovely, your body is slender,
You waver like a running fire,
Herodias hates you, behind the tall curtain,
And Herod beams upon you through a cloud of desire.

She dances through the old heart of Herod,
Causing him great pain and sadness;
She draws the sap of longing into his veins;

She smiles, and he smiles too.
He trembles, watching the languor of her body,
Her cool deliberate feet.
And John is quiet, in the dark cistern,
Hearing above his head a rhythmic beat.

And now they have rewarded her with a precious thing—
She laughs, and carries it high upon her hands,
She dances with it, she weeps upon it—
She kisses the dark hair.
She bears it before her on a bright salver,
She is pale with love, she dances slowly;
And Herod cries into his shaken wine-cup,
Cries, for giving the harlot a thing that is holy.

Dance, Jewess! Dance, white-kneed Salome!
Laugh or cry, what does it matter?
Your little mouth is red with the blood of a prophet;
The shouting of dreams is on your platter.

The Jig of Forslin

Dust arises over the desert and dances,
And sleeps again under a winter moon.
Salome, Herod, Herodias—you shall all perish,
You shall all be dust soon . . .

Sometime, I should like to see this Jewess, Salome—
She is fair, they say, and young.
Through her, things come to pass as prophesied:
God speaks with a strange tongue.

And so at the court of Herod, he is dead. . .
John, with whom I talked by an old plane-tree. . .
John, whose fiery hands are on my head.

The Jig of Forslin

IV.

You smoke with me: you do not think
That I have stood by Jordan's brink:
You talk with me, and do not guess
That I have power to curse or bless. . .
You think you know me, know my name,
Can tell me where and whence I came—
Is knowing to be so simple, then?
And am I one, or a million men?

Brother Peter walked up and down
The cloister shade in a corded gown.
The fountain splashed by the blue yew-trees,
And the sun was shot with glistening bees.
From hill to hill sang bell to bell,
The May sky dreamed; and softly fell,
Some in the shadow, and some in the sun,
Small Judas petals, one by one.

Brother Peter was sick with care,
His pulses beat slow tunes of prayer.

The Jig of Forslin

His heart was like a yellowing leaf,
From bell to bell he mused his grief.
He did not see the bright drops spatter,
Nor Judas blossoms blow and scatter,
He did not see the bees weave by,
Nor sombre yews in the soft May sky—
But up and down his sandalled feet
Soft on the dustless flagstones beat.
And up and down his musings went
Weaving a pattern of discontent.

At Fiesole, betwixt bell and bell,
It was there the hideous thing befell;
Working there with Brother Paul
Pruning the vine-leaves on a wall.
Among the ghostly olive-trees
That shook like silver in the breeze,
A peasant girl came singing by,
Golden of skin and quick of eye,
She turned her cheek and glanced at him,
And straight he forgot his seraphim. . .

The Jig of Forslin

Fior de Ginestra—so she sang,
And yellow bloom in his grey heart sprang,—
Yellow blossoms were on his tongue
And this was May, and she was young.

He looked along, but Brother Paul
Worked at the far end of the wall.
He looked again, and she had turned,
And smiled, and all his body burned.
Petals of pale fire whirled his brain,
His blood was a chorus of singing pain,
And—Holy Mary! who taught him this?
Sudden he blew the girl a kiss. . .
Her brown feet flashed along the grass,
And through the gate he saw them pass—
She waved one hand, the gate went clang,
And '*Fior de Ginestra*'—so she sang.

Brother Paul turned round to see
The source of all this levity.

The Jig of Forslin

Brother Peter snipped at a leaf,
But now his heart was sick with grief.
'Christ, Thy pardon!' he said and said.
He prayed; but still it swooned his head,
'Fior de Ginestra,' sweet as sun;
And he saw her feet like laughter run.

He counted beads, he begged of Heaven
That such a sin might be forgiven;
But the thing that seemed so simple there
Turned, in the cloister, to despair.
He lit two candles of pointed flame
And sought to forget in work his shame:
Opened the marvellous manuscript
Embossed with azure and gold, and dipt
His brush in little cups of paint
For the wings and aureole of a saint.
But the bright hues swam beneath his eyes;
And he shrank with horror to see arise
Her clear face there, her singing smile. . .
He dropped his brushes. This was vile.

The Jig of Forslin

He prayed and fasted. All night long
He knelt and prayed; until the song
Of birds in the cloister pierced his cell
With drowsy beams; and the matin bell.
All day he fasted, all day prayed.
Up and down, in the cloister's shade,
Slowly he walked, and did not see
How late sun sprinkled the blue yew tree.

Moonlight through the cell door came
And quivered its edges with pale blue flame.
But since the Christ had been betrayed
Was it enough that he fasted, prayed?
He took the thongs down from the shelf
And silent, in moonlight, scourged himself.

Said Brother Paul, 'Now what can ail
Our Brother Peter, who looks so pale?'
Slant eyes peered askance at him;
And sudden the columns reeled to swim—

The Jig of Forslin

They tilted and ran before his eyes
Low and brown along blue skies,
A flash of green, a gleam of white,
Paths and fountain. . . Then came night.

They laid his body beside the pool,
Where the yew-tree shade spread blue and cool;
Into the spring they dipped their hands
Above the wavering pebbles and sands,
Lifted their eyes for Heaven's grace,
And bathed with silver the dreaming face.
They spoke in whispers, round him kneeling.
Lay brothers through the garden stealing,
Dropping spade or pruning-hook,
Came to the fountain-side, to look
With long and curious oxen-stare
At the body of Peter lying there.

An hour passed. And in the shade
Still he dreamed, while the Abbot prayed.

The Jig of Forslin

Bees in the Judas-blossoms clinging
Shook down petals, larks rose singing,
The noon was filled with bubbles of sound,
The pure sky dreamed, serene, profound.
And then at last his thin hands stirred,—
He raised his head, and spoke no word,
Looked round him with unknowing eyes,
And shrank, beneath too brilliant skies.
'Shall I be pardoned, Christ, for this?
I have betrayed you with a kiss.'
This, for the moment, was all he said,
And closed his eyes, and bent his head.

'I alone of the chosen few
Was not of Galilee, they knew.
And so they came at dusk to me,—
In the garden, by a purple tree.
Thirty pieces of silver there,
Thirty glints in the twilight air—
Thirty silver whispers spoken,—
Master, forgive! my vows were broken.

"I did not clearly know, I swear,
What thing it was I was doing there;
Nor did I guess from such soft breath,
That men like these could purpose death. . .

'O Master! When we supped that night
On the bare board by candle-light,
I knew your great heart had divined
The venomous secret in my mind.
For when you drank, and broke the bread,
It was to me you turned your head
Saying, with grave eyes, quietly,
"When you do this, remember me."
I was confused; I knew my sin;
The Pharisees and Sanhedrin
Cried in my veins. And so I rose,
Too weak to tell you all, I chose
To do the thing I was bought to do;
I brought them, led them in to you,
I marked you with the unholy kiss.
And I was paid with coins for this.

'Staves shall blossom in scarlet flowers,
And all dumb mouths have singing powers;
There shall be wedding of dust and sea
Before my soul is given me . . .
They come in the night with staff and sword,
They have wried his hands with hempen cord;
Through filthy streets they jostle him;
And all grows faint, and all grows dim. . .

'On Olivet we shrink. We see
The black procession to Calvary.
The soldiers sway with ripple of spears,
The trumpets cry, the rabble jeers.
Jesus is whipped for being slow,
The great cross pains his shoulder so.
Once he falls, though we hear no sound,
And lies unmoving on the ground;
And as he falls my soul falls too:
I am dazed, I know not what I do . . .
The little whip-lash flickers in sun,
My body feels the cool blood run,

The red welts ridge and sear my skin,
My eyes are blind with the blood of sin.
But a girl has lifted him a cup
He drinks, and again he staggers up.
I am spent with watching. I have no breath.
My body is stretched to verge of death.

'They have climbed the hill they call the Skull.
The crowd packs close. . . Hollow and dull,
The ominous mallet-strokes resound.
He is stretched out silent on the ground.
Far off, we hear the brass nails driven;
The sullen echoes knock at heaven.
Far off, three crosses toss and rise
Black and little against the skies.
One faint voice wails agony—
It was a thief, it was not He.

'He writhes his head from side to side.
O holy Christ I have crucified!—

I twist there on the cross with you;
And what you suffer I suffer too. . .

'Ravens gather: they blot the sun:
Out of the sky the light has run.
The orchards dim, the hill grows stark,
The earth rocks thrice in clamorous dark.
Great wheels rumble, and horses neigh;
Like mist the darkness rolls away. . .
The sun breaks forth. The birds again
Sing, as after a shower of rain.

'Blue in the gulf the clear stream flows
Through humid gardens of lily and rose.
Above the gardens, in terraces,
Are almond-trees, then olive-treees;
Above them all one tree, alone,
Stands in the sky. The blossom blown
Purples the ground, and purples the bough.
And there Death sings in the blossoms now.

'I turn my back on Golgotha,
Where all my sinister sorrows are,—
And seek this blossoming leafless tree.
It shall forever be named for me.'

v.

Twilight is spacious, near things in it seem far,
And distant things seem near.
Now in the green west hangs a yellow star;
And now across old waters you may hear
The profound gloom of bells among still trees,
Like a rolling of huge boulders beneath seas.

Peter said that Christ, though crucified,
Had not died;
But that escaping from his cerements,
In human flesh, with mortal sense,
Amazed at such an ending,
He fled alone, and hid in Galilee,

And lived in secret, spending
His days and nights, perplexed, in contemplation:
And did not know if this were surely he.

Did Peter tell me this? Or was I Peter?
Or did I listen to a tavern-story?
Green leaves thrust out and fall. It was long ago.
Dust has been heaped upon us . . We have perished.
We clamor again. And again we are dust and blow.

Well, let us take the music, and drift with it
Into the darkness . . . It is exquisite.

PART V.

I.

As sometimes, in the playhouse,
While pizzicati tremble, and lights are low,
And the hero pleads his love in the crude moonlight,
Or the villain staggers to shadows after a blow:
Suddenly through the quiet, from dark streets,
Through walls and doors a sound from the world is heard,
A shout, a piercing whistle, sharp and clear,
Or a horn, blown and echoing, or a loud cry,—
And the lovers and the blue moonlight seem absurd;
And the slow music, and the well-ordered words,
The flute-players with white hands, and the footlights, seem
Unreal and soundless as a dream:
So, as I follow silently through my mind
The devious paths that wind

The Jig of Forslin

Among old forests lamia-haunted,
Through silences enchanted,
Or into the glare and sound and vibrant dust
Of labyrinthine cities, among pale faces,
Among the glidings of uncounted eyes,
Wearing the fire of love, the tinsel of lust,
Singing in music, or uttering cries;
Dying in garrets to the slow tick of clocks;
Swinging in gaslit cellars from knotted ropes;
Catching with claws at illusory hopes;
Lying with perfumed harlots or picking locks;—
Measuring out the intolerable hours
In the strange secret hearts of those unknown,
To dive to slimy pavements from high towers,
Or walk abroad in the light of the stars, alone,—

So, in an instant, through this silent dream,
Sounds from the real world break,—
Suddenly I awake,
And hear familiar voices, just as though
I had dozed a second and missed a word or two.

The Jig of Forslin

I see the familiar street-lamps gleam,
Or find myself sitting, as long ago,
In the same café among the people I knew,—
With the same coffee before me, and between my fingers
The same slow cigarette consuming in smoke:
And in my ears an echo of music lingers,
And the sound of a dying sentence that someone spoke.

And I am amazed, I do not know
If this is I, who drink vermouth,
Or whether that was I who rode the air.
I fell to an outspread net; I stabbed my lover;
I kissed a vampire's hair . . .

Dreams, in the mind, move silently to and fro
As winds through the clear sky blow,—
I do not guess
Whence they come or whither they go.
A soft air, like a music, divides the smoke,—

The Jig of Forslin

The lazily shifting smoke of the cigarettes,—
We follow upon it; and the tired heart forgets . . .

Once I must have loved, for I remember
Seeing her white face, and the clear green eyes . . .
I followed her through the slanting silver of rain;
I followed the sound of her breathing through the darkness;
Till at last, and suddenly, she dissolved in the sunlight,
I was engulfed in a dazzle of silent skies.

Once, I stood by a curbstone in the moonlight,
A carriage stopped, a face leaned out;
The carriage was silvered and ghostly in the moonlight.
We sat together talking in intimate darkness,
The wheels murmured, the hooves beat;
Together we echoed alone down an infinite street.
And as the street-lamps slanted across her eyes,
And swam into darkness again through spear-like shadows,

The Jig of Forslin

She was shy, she laughed . . . But that was long ago.
And when I left her, or why, or who she was,
I never shall know.

I have climbed stairs with a candle between my palms
To seek the eternal secret behind a door.
I have struck matches and seen serene white faces.
Once in the darkness I heard her singing,
And followed the music into her heart;
Sometimes, I have found delight in secret places . . .
But ever I turn and turn, with my turning shadow,
Ever like smoke I am blown and spread and die,
Dissolved in the speckless brilliance of a sky . . .

Well, no matter; I die, but all dies with me;
The world reels out into silence;
The darkness of death comes suddenly over the sun.

The Jig of Forslin

II.

Rhythms there are that take the blood with magic,
Smoothing it out in silver;
Rhythms there are that die in the brain's dark
chambers
Like a blowing fragrance.
Whose voice is this, so filling the darkness,
Making the stars so bright?
Who is it that dances before us through the night?
Yet through these rhythms laughter is always breaking,
We dream our dreams, but dream forever waking,
The elfin horns are silenced, the mouths we kissed
Are blown aside like mist.

Isolda, leaning among her coffee-cups,
Smiles to me.
Helen of Sparta, bearing a silver tray,
Laughs at me.
Isolda, I will meet you to-night in the moonlight
And praise your golden hair.
Helen, I will walk with you by the sea-waves
And kiss you there.

The Jig of Forslin

One leaned down from a balcony sweet with jasmine
To blow her kiss to me.
One over cobwebs danced in the cold of the moon.
One came late by the dark of a city wall.
By the dust of a new-made grave, one came too soon.

Fall, rhythms! Die, music! My lovers betray me—
They kiss me, and sing, but their brothers are creeping
to slay me.
A darkness is in their eyes, foreboding death.
They have conspired with silence to suck my breath.

One ran into the pinewood, calling me after
With a wave of her hand:
One, with a soft hypocritical laughter,
Slid through the lips of the sand.
One ran lightly up silver ladders of rain;
I never saw her again.

Fall, rhythms! Die, music! For always, in moonlight,
Soon as I start to praise, and she to love,

The Jig of Forslin

The moonlight is shattered, the petals are blown away.
Darkness whistles between us, the music shudders,
The enchantment passes, the audience rises,
The curtain falls, the musicians cease to play . . .

And once more I must go,
As I have gone before a thousand times,
To a little dingy room: and light the gas
And read the evening paper; or at the window,
Observe the old moon, shining upon the rooftops;
Or watch, in the street, the lonely harlots pass . . .

III.

The astrologer's red face slowly turned towards me
Against a blackboard figured with horoscopes;
An old man nodded; a woman sighed.
'Now here's a little blue-eyed girl in Virgo,
Loved by a syphilitic, twice her age . . .'
Among the ghostly stars a whisper died.

And as one walking down a corridor
Towards a lamplit mirror
Sees his own body, remote and small and dim,
Insubstantial and vague, come slowly nearer,
With equal steps, and fixed eyes always clearer,
Until at last it sharply faces him,—
So, in the darkness of that air,
He slowly became aware
That it was he who lay upon the bed
With a pillow beneath his head:
He suddenly faced his own identity,
He knew himself, grown old and tired and ill,
And saw the white spread flowing away in darkness,
Or into infinity.

He was tired: he wished to die.
If one could only, by an act of will,
Stop the sick heart forever! If one could only
Shake off this hideous sickness, like a dream!—
He was exhausted by thick vertigo:
Weary in every nerve, in every vein,

The Jig of Forslin

Of slow, exact, mechanical, measured steps.
The heights of curbstones stretched his chin to heaven.
The widths of puddles wedged his brain apart.
And he was compelled, even with eyes wide open,
To fight his way through a jeering darkness,
To calculate on suddenly spreading oceans,
Scale monstrous cliffs of curbstone with one step:
And always, at the moment of his achievement,
Unwarily, he raised his eyes,—
Raised them, one second, from the relentless
ground,—
And, suddenly, he went crashing down in chaos . . .

It was a pity if one who, like himself,
Clung with his naked nerves to the edge of the gulf,
Could not so rest his eyes on a little flower! . . . .
It was a pity if a black wind must come
And blow it away from him.
It was a pity, if, by some harsh enchantment,
Like some rank fog from the envious heart of the
world,
A ladderless wall should silently rise between them.

The Jig of Forslin

It was true she was young, it was true he was twice her
age,
It was true she was pretty, and not yet disillusioned,
That he was sick and old and might soon die,—
But because in his youth the fire of life had seared
him,—
Betrayed him into an acid pool of love,—
Was that a reason that all should be denied him?
Was that a reason the gods thought adequate?
No, not for this!—
She came, then, through the corridors of his brain,
Walking into a chamber large and fair;
Her feet made music over the floors of his brain,
She exhaled a coolness and a fragrance there;
She walked forever through the chambers of his brain,
With young blue eyes, white face, and yellow hair.

Why had the harlot been so importunate?
Why, against his will,
Had he so weakly consented to go with her?
He must have been tired, that night, he must have been
lonely,

He must have been lonely and tired, or he'd never have
done it . . .
She was lean and ugly, and vulgar in every fibre,
Her eyes were shallow and hard, her face was
powdered,
She spat between kisses . . . And soon as their love was
over
She left him to walk the streets.

And now the whole sick world in the nauseous dark-
ness
Sprawled like a harlot's body, diseased and old;
And the darkness in which he struggled,
Seemed like the harlot's hair.
And as he tossed and turned and closed his eyes
He saw her horrible face before him rise,
Her lean red mouth, her pale consumptive cheeks:
He saw her lips just opening for a smile,
Malicious and slow and vile . . .
Wherever he turned, her face was there,
She smiled, and raised blue elbows to comb her hair.

And all this torture for that ambiguous pleasure!
And to be told he must not slake his fever
In the cool stream that sang before his feet!
That he must reel forever and grasp at nothing,
Dragged to a vortex on waves of oily heat! . . .

Beyond this darkness, beyond this yellow darkness,
No doubt there was a world in which men laughed,
In which the grass was dusted blue with dew-fall.
No doubt there was a world in which girls sang,
And waited for their lovers to come by moonlight . . .
But was it not for him?. . .

She came, then, through the corridors of his brain,
Walking into a chamber large and fair:
Her feet made music over the floors of his brain;
She exhaled a coolness, she exhaled a fragrance there:
She walked forever through the chambers of his brain;
With young blue eyes, pale face, and yellow hair.
And he remembered, with peace, that she had said

She loved him. . . But would she love him when he was dead?

The astrologer's red face slowly turned towards me
Against a blackboard scrolled with horoscopes,
An old man nodded, a woman sighed.
'Now here's a little blue-eyed girl in Virgo. . .
Loved by a syphilitic. . . ' A ghostly whisper
Floated among his deathless stars, and died.

IV.

You say, before the music starts, while still
Cacophonies of tuning drawl and mutter,—
Snarls of horns and cries of violins,—
That so-and-so has just divorced his wife,
That Paul is dead, leaving his work unfinished,—
And what's-her-name was hurried, secretly,
To an asylum. . . What says the music, then?. . .

The Jig of Forslin

Winds pour from the chattering south,
Warm foam crumbles along lava beaches,
Parrots are screeching greeen
In a sky of smouldering blue.
Dull broad leaves struggle against the sun.
And I am there, and you. . . .

You say, the time has come to make decisions,—
Question and vacillation must be ended:
Life is too short, and one must choose his way.
Laura was right in breaking her engagement.
They were all foolish to gossip as they did. . .
And wasn't it strange. . .

Shell-roads glare and shimmer,
Heat is trembling on scarlet rooftops,
Bland leaves stealthily creep and stare.
Let us go up among the pinewoods,
Let us go up the wind, it is cooler there;
Let us go slowly along hot yellow beaches
To where blue pinewoods lead us upward. . .

The Jig of Forslin

No, it was not good taste, to say the least. . .
So soon! With spring grass not yet sharp above him!—
And Helen said. . . And Beatrice said. . .

Sunlight tempers how subtly into moonlight!
Gold to silver, an alchemy of sound;
Rose to silence. . . . And here we dream.
Green clouds slowly sway and revolve above us,
Blue clouds dilate and suddenly vanish,
Gold stars are swallowed or gleam.
Under these moving arches like ghosts we seem!
Are we real, or must we perish?—
We blow in the air, like leaves our words are blown. . .
Did you hear what I said?. . .
I said that I loved you, that we are alone. . .
A rushing of green clouds scatters the stars overhead,
A roar of waves has scattered my words.
I am running, silent, through nets of shadows,
I am caught in the shadows of branches.
I follow your face, but now it has paled and gone,
Like a ghostly reflection of the running moon. . .

The Jig of Forslin

As for friendship, you say,—can women know it?
No! it is always love, with women, or nothing. . .
There, you can see her now—she's turned her head:
And that's the latest way to arrange your hair.

Moonlight spreads how gorgeously into sunlight!
Blue rocks bask in the sun,
Dragon flies weave shuttles of blue through gold,
Up the green hill we run,
And lie in the dazzle, and watch the clouds
Swim in intense deep blue,
Dissolving, streaming, amassing coldly. . .
Golden is noon; golden are you;
Black bees cling and balance in goldenrod;
You laugh in the low-voiced grass,
Watching with lazy sun-filled eyes
Silent eternity streamed in the blue above you. . .
And you do not hear the blood in my brain that cries,
'I love you, I love you, I love you! . . .

You say, that cello-player, with the black eyes,

Wrote music once, conducted symphonies,
Had great ambitions. . . He drank himself to this.
Poor fellow! Is that true?—And so good-looking!

v.

Music from concertinas in an alley,
Tinkle of glasses through a swinging door,
And cats with cold green eyes:
I have seen it all a thousand times before.
A thousand nights have died as this night dies. . .
Take my arm, and come along with me.
We'll spend this night contentedly.
When the book is opened just put down—
Oh, any names, it doesn't matter! . . .
They ask no questions there; they know me there;
And follow me up the stair. . .

Take my arm! You aren't afraid of me?. . .
You wouldn't want to leave me,—would you dear?

The Jig of Forslin

Isn't it sweet, this wa m June evening air!
This is the place, right here. . .

Turn the lights out. . .No? You want to see me?
Well, all right. Aren't you funny, though!
My hair is short because I've had a fever,—
It's just begun to grow.
That's a hair-net—haven't you ever seen one?
Haven't you ever loved a girl before?
Lovely! I never thought my breasts were lovely!—
This is a ring my father wore.

Most men—they're so indifferent; but you,—
You like me, don't you. You're so nice to me.
You look at me, somehow, as if you loved me. . .
Dear, take me with you somewhere by the sea.
We'll go in swimming and lie on the beach together,
And love each other all night through.
All I need is a pair of gloves,—and a feather
To trim my hat with, green or blue.

The Jig of Forslin

Your hands, touching my face, stroking my
forehead,—
What is it they remind me of?
All sorts of things when I was young and little;
And the first time I fell in love. . .
Kiss me, dear. You kiss me as if you meant it.
Keep the ring—it's brass—to remember me by.
Don't forget to write me. Turn the lights out.
Soon as you've left, I'm going to sleep,— or try. . .

Now you've gone. And I'm alone once more,
Staring against the darkness;
As I have stared a thousand times before.
You walk through lonely streets in quiet moonlight.
You'll throw away the worthless ring I wore.
Where are you going? What will you see to-morrow?
Who will your lovers be?
How long,—I wonder,—will you remember me?. . .

* * * * * * * * *

The Jig of Forslin

Music from concertinas in an alley,
And cats with slow green eyes,—
A thousand nights have died as this night dies.
The stars dance out, the air blows warm to-night,
The girls are all in white.
Bargains are struck, they laugh, they glide away,
Some to love and some to lust.
In smoky lounges tired musicians play.
The harlot's slippers are grey with dust. . .

And now we turn towards a depth of sleep,
Tired of music, of lamps and cigarettes,
Tired of fevered faces.
Now let us seek a solitude, and rest
In dark and quiet places.

Let us go in through labyrinthine darkness
Seeking the strange cool secret of ourselves,
To stretch ourselves in soundless shadow, and sleep.
Let us go in through labyrinthine darkness.
Wind whistles. We are falling. The night is deep.

The Jig of Forslin

Who am I? Am I he that loved and murdered?
Who walked in sunlight, heard a music playing?
Or saw a pigeon tumbling down a wall?
Someone drowned in the cold floods of my heart.
Someone fell to a net—I saw him fall.

I have run in through earth and out again,
I have been under seas, among hot stars;
My eyes are dazzled; my feet are tired.
Someone hated me, and pursued, and killed me.
For a million years my body has been desired.

Tired of change, I seek the unmoving centre—
But is it moveless,—or are all things turning?
Great wheels revolve. I fall among them and die.
My veins are streets. Millions of men rush through them.
Which, in this terrible multitude, is I?

I hurry to him, I plunge through jostling darkness,
I think I see his face—
He's gone. And a sinister stranger leers at me.
Countless eyes of strangers are turned toward me.
Who's this that all our eyes are turned to see?

We look at him, but suddenly he has vanished,
We turn in the darkness, we murmur at one another,
We snarl with hatred, we strike, we kill, we run.
We whirl in the silence, become a soundless vortex.
We lift our idiot faces to the sun.
We flow together; we rage, we shout, we sing;
Pour and engulf; recoil, disgorge, and spring.

VI.

The walls of all the city are rolled away;
And suddenly all the lighted rooms are bare,
Numberless gas-jets flare,
Thousands of secret lives, with unconcern,

The Jig of Forslin

Yawn and turn.
Men in their shirtsleeves reading papers,
Women by mirrors combing out their hair,
Women sleeping, old men dying,
The furtive lover half way up the stair;
And in tumultuous cabarets
And music-filled cafés,
Dancers among white tables slowly turning,
Face fixed on face with passionate yearning,
Following ever the interwreathing beat
With spellbound feet.
The old violinist, with white hair,
Leaves his music, tosses his arms in the air,
Snaps his fingers and sings;
Maenad maidens in bacchanalian dance
Follow as in a trance
With heads thrown back, shut eyes, and yearning
throats
The menacing mournful notes.
The young man drinks and leans across the table,
Through clamor of music and hurrying feet

The Jig of Forslin

Desperate to repeat
What she, who lowers her eyes, has heard before;
And across his shoulder, while he has turned away,
She smiles to her lover who smiles beside the door. . .

Darkness descends, more walls are rolled away. . .
Sudden, they lower the curtain on the play. . .
A chorus-girl has fainted before the footlights;
She is hurried off, her child is born and dies,
In a hotel bedroom white and weak she lies,
While chorus-girls about her giggle and joke
And the young men smoke,
And all are asking, 'Who was the father, dear?
No one will hear!'—

The sky above grows suddenly coppery red,
Sparks and smoke go up across the stars,
Wheels rumble, the men rush out of bars
To see great horses pass.
Thick flames burst from the windows and spout up
walls,

The Jig of Forslin

The firemen's faces are white in the ghastly light,
A ladder is raised, up it a fireman crawls;
And suddenly with a roar the ladder falls
With the falling housefront into a storm of fire,
And the crowd shrieks, and presses back from the heat,
And the twisted flame spouts higher. . .
A woman had started to carry her child downstairs,
She was driven back by a gust of flame in her face,
They lay on the scorching floor to escape the smoke,
The child at last ceased crying,
She knew that her child was dead, that she herself was
dying. . .
Peal, bells! Crash, walls! . . .
Into the quiet darkness at last it falls. . .

Policemen loiter along their beats
Through deserted streets.
And now, while the houses sleep,
The burglars scale the moonlit walls, or creep
Up cobbled alleys; doors are quietly forced,
Panes are cut and tapped, to fall with a chime,

The Jig of Forslin

Fitfully flits and falls
The nervous arc of light on floors and walls.
Safes are drilled, silver turns and glistens,
A whistle is blown, the night falls suddenly still,
Sweating the marauder listens,
Glides to the window-sill,
And under the watchful stars, at last, is gone.
And then over glimmering walls and waking streets,
Among grey ash-cans, creeping to numberless rooms,
Comes the cold soulless dawn.

VIII.

Time... Time... Time...
And through the immortal silence we may hear
The choral stars like great clocks tick and chime.
Destiny, with inquisitorial eye,
Regards the jewelled movement of the sky.
And there alone, in a little lamplit room,
Immortal, changeless, in a changeless dream,
Forslin sits and meditates; and hears
The hurrying days go down to join the years.

The Jig of Forslin

In the evening, as the lamps are lighted,
Sitting alone in his strange world,
He meditates; and through his musing hears
The tired footfalls of the dying day
Monotonously ebb and ebb away
Into the smouldering west;
And hears the dark world slowly come to rest.
Now, as the real world dwindles and grows dim,
His dreams come back to him:
Now, as one who stands
In the aquarium's gloom, by creeping sands,
Watching the glide of fish beneath pale bubbles,
The bubbles briefly streaming,
Cold and white and green, poured in silver,—
He does not know if this is wake or dreaming;
But thinks to lean, reach out his hands, and swim. . .

The music weaves about him, gold and silver;
The music chatters, the music sings,
The music sinks and dies.
Who dies, who lives? What leaves remain forever?

The Jig of Forslin

Who knows the secret of the immortal springs?
Who laughs, who kills, who cries?

We hold them all, they walk our dreams forever,
Nothing perishes in that haunted air,
Nothing but is immortal there.
And we ourselves, dying with all our worlds,
Will only pass the ghostly portal
Into another's dream; and so live on
Through dream to dream, immortal.